

Washington Park Arboretum

# BULLETIN

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Winter 2015

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## Washington Park Arboretum

The Arboretum is a 230-acre dynamic garden of trees and shrubs, displaying internationally renowned collections of oaks, conifers, camellias, Japanese and other maples, hollies and a profusion of woody plants from the Pacific Northwest and around the world. Aesthetic enjoyment gracefully co-exists with science in this spectacular urban green space on the shores of Lake Washington. Visitors come to learn, explore, relax or reflect in Seattle's largest public garden.

The Washington Park Arboretum is managed cooperatively by the University of Washington Botanic Gardens and Seattle Parks and Recreation; the Arboretum Foundation is its major support organization.

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The Arboretum Foundation's mission is to create and strengthen an engaged community of donors, volunteers and advocates who will promote, protect and enhance the Washington Park Arboretum for current and future generations.

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**ABOVE:** *Rhododendron ririei*, an early-bloomer from China, flowering in the Witt Winter Garden in February. (Photo by Niall Dunne)

**ON THE COVER:** Hybrid silk tassel bush, *Garrya x issaquahensis*, blooming on the west side of the Witt Winter Garden in February. (Photo by Niall Dunne)

# Will You Share Your #ArboretumStory?

This fall I had the extraordinary opportunity to spend a day with Nancy Davidson Short in the Arboretum.

We took her to see the preschool kids in the Fiddleheads Forest School, and they showed her their treasures and told her all about them—their leaves and lichens and special fairy village.

We took her to see Pacific Connections and told her all about the newly renovated Overlook Shelter. “Ah, yes,” said Nancy. “I remember when it was built.” Really? “Yes, I was a student at the University of Washington when they began building the Arboretum.” And, she told how as an undergraduate she came to write update articles on the construction of the Arboretum for “Sunset Magazine.” Construction started in 1934. Nancy graduated from UW in 1936. You see, Nancy celebrated her 102nd birthday in September!

Nancy has lived just across the Lake from the Arboretum ever since her graduation. And,

**Nancy Davidson Short, with friend Kathy Fries, at Nancy's 100th birthday party in the Arboretum in 2012.**



oh, the stories she has to tell about this place, its characters, and its history. Spending a day with her is like opening up a treasure box of treats.

I feel the same way when I listen in on a discussion among longtime volunteers about the days of the Unit Council, when members from all of our units came once a year dressed in funny floral hats and did maintenance in the Arboretum (see Work and Fun Day photo, page 14). Or, when Donald Graham, Jr. comes for a visit and recalls being a young lad watching his father and mother organize the efforts to have the Arboretum built.

The Arboretum is 80 years old this year. Seattleites have fallen in love strolling Azalea Way in the spring and celebrated summer weddings at the Overlook Shelter. We have ridden horses and bicycles, pushed baby carriages and strollers, studied native plants and exotic ornamentals, and taken to waterfront trails and kayaks to watch passing birds and boats.

We all have our favorite memories of special moments in the Arboretum. I would love to hear yours. Will you share one with me? If you will email your stories to me at [pmiller@arboretumfoundation.org](mailto:pmiller@arboretumfoundation.org), I will read them and share some of my favorites with our Arboretum community. Look for them in future letters, on our website ([www.arboretumfoundation.org](http://www.arboretumfoundation.org)), or on our Facebook page ([www.facebook.com/Arboretum.Found](http://www.facebook.com/Arboretum.Found)). ~

Cheers,

*Paige Miller*

Paige Miller, Executive Director,  
Arboretum Foundation

**P.S.** And, speaking of Azalea Way: If you love its riot of spring color, don't miss our display garden at the Northwest Flower & Garden Show in February. It's called “Picture Yourself on Azalea Way,” and its magic will draw you right in!



# Restoring Heronswood

TEXT BY DANIEL J. HINKLEY / PHOTOS BY LYNNE HARRISON

*I* had always thought of our first property, Heronswood, as more of a plant collection than a garden. Though my husband, Robert, and I considered the layout and hardscape during the process of its creation, priority was granted to siting the subjects we needed for our nursery—rather than deliberation of the design principles of texture, color or continuity. Admittedly,

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**ABOVE:** Treasured plants, such as this *Dactylorhiza maculata* in the Woodland Garden, are getting a new lease on life as the restoration of Heronswood continues.



the garden seemed to resonate with many visitors, yet I never felt satisfied with the results. So it is quite astonishing to have the rarified opportunity to return and attempt to get it right (and better) on the second try.

As of November, 2012, after the Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe successfully won the bid at auction for Heronswood, I have worked as a volunteer—and now as its part-time director—along with several past employees (known as our Heronistas), tribal members, a limited garden staff, and a small army of regular volunteers to restore the garden. It has been an amazing, frustrating, wondrous, exhausting, and...thus far... exhilarating process.

### Treasures Lost and Regained

From the beginning of the restoration process, long before we lifted the first shovel or pruning saw on that November morning, we came to understand that bringing Heronswood back to its former shine—and beyond—would take a matter of years, not months. Our mantra was to do no

harm until we knew what remained of the original collection, and what could be salvaged and replanted.

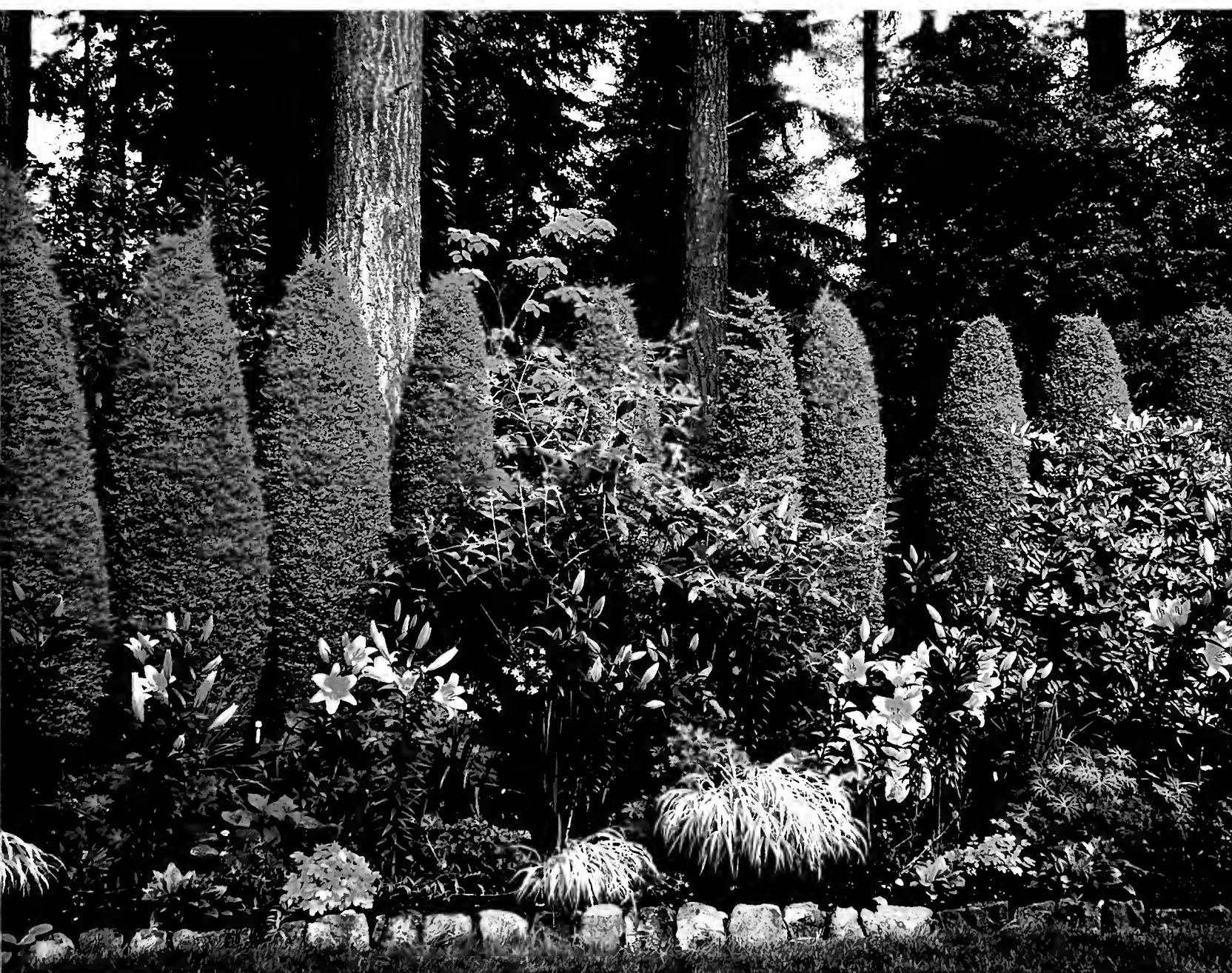
With that being said, fierce strokes were necessary simply to reveal the beds, many of which had been swallowed by undisciplined shrubs, vines and groundcovers, in a climate in which lazy gardening wreaks havoc in short order. Some decisions to remove, rather than attempt to rejuvenate, were more easily made than others; many trees had outgrown their spaces or were in such poor health and condition that their eventual removal was all but certain.

A pair of *Sorbus forrestii* in our front border—a gift from Brian Mulligan, the late, celebrated Northern-Irish horticulturist and director emeritus of Washington Park Arboretum—have sadly been removed, but not before harvesting a bit of remaining fruit and sowing its seed. The original specimen of *Cercidiphyllum japonicum* 'Heronswood Globe' had suffered too many summers without supplemental irrigation and

**ABOVE:** The Blue Border prior to restoration..

**OPPOSITE TOP:** Volunteers working hard to weed the Blue Border and prepare it for replanting.

**OPPOSITE BOTTOM:** The renovated border planted with colorful *Buddleja*, lilies, geraniums, and more.



was beyond the point of return; it, too, was cut to the ground.

The good news is that many of the woody plants were in remarkably good condition. An *Acer griseum*, given to me by Robert for my 35th birthday and planted on the southeast corner of the house, is an exceptionally fine specimen of this beautiful species. In the woodland, *Emmenopterys henryi*, a rare deciduous member of the Rubiaceae, is approaching 50 feet in height; we are optimistic that it might prove to be the first of this species to present flowers in the Pacific Northwest.

### Volunteer Muscle

The beds throughout the garden were overrun by both natives and exotic herbaceous and woody plants, and this has proven to be the greatest barrier in moving forward at a reasonable pace. Of the exotics, Japanese anemone (*Anemone x hybrida*), lily of the valley (*Convallaria majalis*) and *Hypericum androsaemum* have been the worst offenders, yet they have been matched with equal annoyance by three natives: *Mitella breweri*, *Maianthemum canadense* (false Solomon's seal) and *Maianthemum dilatatum* (false lily of the valley). Extracting a considerable inventory of treasures from this tangle, and then permanently eradicating the weeds, has been a lengthy and exasperating process.

The greatest strides forward in this regard have been accomplished by two volunteer days per month. Our "Weed, Walk and Talk" days have garnered a steady and dedicated pool of volunteers, who have already begun feeling a part of the family. We remain committed to making the days

simply not about work, but learning about and sharing a common love of plants and their cultivation. With their help, the Blue Border has been entirely renovated, while beds adjacent to the house are nearing an opportunity of replanting.

Perhaps one of the most profound changes, thus far, to the garden has been in our potager. This area was adopted this year by celebrated gardener Linda Cochran, formerly of Bainbridge Island. Forsaking the time-consuming art of vegetable gardening, Linda created a sizzle of Orienpet lilies and a bevy of South African and Californian annuals. The theme will continue for the next two years.

Our current goal is to have two large woodland beds cleaned, soil-amended, and ready for planting by the spring of 2015. With these areas ready to receive plants, we can then begin extracting coveted specimens and immediately replant them in new locations, while preparing other beds for complete renewal.

### Shifting Focus: Wild-Collected, Woody Plants

As a result of my continued and appreciable collection work throughout Asia, South America, New Zealand and Tasmania after Heronswood was shuttered in 2006, we are actively replacing non-wild-collected taxa, or taxa with lost data, with plants of known provenance. The direction of the garden inventory will be increasingly towards wild-collected material or superior clones of wild-collected material. Because of an already-existing significant collection of the genus *Hydrangea*, a goal is to develop a reference collection of hydrangea species.

## Heronswood Timeline

**1987**—Dan Hinkley and Robert Jones open Heronswood on a five-acre site in Kingston, Washington. (The property was eventually enlarged to seven and a half acres.) Over the next two decades, the nursery and gardens become internationally famous for showcasing rare and unusual plants from around the world and introducing them to the trade.

**2000**—The W. Atlee Burpee Company purchases the property and nursery business. A year later, the company filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection.

**2006**—Heronswood nursery and garden are shuttered, beginning a six-year period of virtual neglect.

**2012**—The Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe purchases Heronswood at auction, and the rebirth begins.



**ABOVE:** The potager prior to restoration.

**BETWEEN:** The renovated potager, filled with dazzling annuals and Orienpet lillies.





TOP: The Woodland Garden overgrown with weeds.

MIDDLE: The author directing volunteers during the renovation of a woodland bed.

BELOW: The Woodland Garden ready to receive new plants.



**BELOW:** The author leads a “Weed, Walk & Talk” tour for Heronswood volunteers.



Due to limited staffing, and the degree of work inherent to herbaceous perennials, much of the seven and a half acres will become increasingly woody in nature. Even the perennial borders will host a greater percentage of shrubs that require less annual maintenance, while providing structure throughout the year.

Formulation of a master plan for the tribal properties will soon commence, and this will gradually bring to focus the future use of the property and garden. At this point, our energies are simply being directed into a reveal of the garden. What we are adamant about is there be no attempt to recreate what Heronswood was at its zenith in the late 1990s. The site has always been munificent and has readily accepted the premise that a garden should exist there. We are determined to make it better than it ever was.

I am eternally grateful for the second chance to do that. ☺

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**DANIEL J. HINKLEY** is an ardent supporter of Washington Park Arboretum and a long-serving member of the “Bulletin” Editorial Board. He writes, lectures, consults and spends each autumn in remote areas looking for new additions for our gardens. He and his husband, Robert L. Jones, tend their personal garden, Windcliff, near Indianola, Washington.

**LYNNE HARRISON** is a widely published horticultural photographer based in Mercer Island, Washington. She was principal photographer for “Fragrance in Bloom,” by Ann Lovejoy and “The Explorer’s Garden: Perennials,” by Dan Hinkley, among other books.

## Visiting and Supporting Heronswood

The Port Gamble S’Klallam Foundation coordinates fundraising efforts, membership activities and special events to support the restoration and maintenance of Heronswood. The garden is open to the public four times annually, during the popular Plant Sale & Garden Open events. Volunteers can enjoy a tour of the garden when they donate a few hours of work during regular “Weed, Walk & Talk” events, or private tours can be arranged. For a 2015 event schedule, or to find out more about how to schedule a tour or support the garden, visit [www.huronswoodgarden.org](http://www.huronswoodgarden.org) or call (360) 297-9623.

# OFF THE BEATEN PATH: Hidden Treasures of the Arboretum The Pink-Flowered Strawberry Tree

BY DANIEL MOUNT

**T**he strawberry tree (*Arbutus unedo*) is well represented in the Arboretum. The colony that frames the patio on the south end of the Graham Visitors Center draws attention each fall and early winter with its dense clusters of small, urn-shaped white flowers and spectacular scarlet fruits. It would be hard to miss this show if you parked at the Visitors Center. Yet deeper in the Arboretum, there is another grouping of strawberry trees that most visitors miss.

Three pink-flowered strawberry trees (*Arbutus unedo* f. *rubra*) can be found in the Mediterranean Collection, directly south of the Sorbus Collection, just off Arboretum Drive. During most of the year, these trees vanish into the evergreen tapestry of the park and are likely only seen by those with a keen eye for variations in the color green. Their leathery, evergreen foliage is dark and shines above a swatch of

velvet-leaved, white rock rose (*Cistus × corbariensis*) to the south and the felted-silver carpet of daisy bush (*Brachyglottis* 'Sunshine') to the north.

What is unique about these trees is not only the color of their flowers but also their provenance. Strawberry tree is primarily a Mediterranean species, found throughout that sea's basin as an integral part of the low, scrubby woodlands known as *macchia* in Italy and *maquis* in France. But before the last Ice Age, *Arbutus unedo* was widespread throughout a much warmer Western Europe. Today, there are still isolated relict populations in both southwestern and northwestern Ireland, most notably around Killarney, in County Kerry, and Lough Gill, in County Sligo—which is home to the northernmost native population of the strawberry tree. *Arbutus unedo* f. *rubra* was found in 1835 near the village of Glengarriff in the southwestern county of Cork.





ABOVE: The pink flower clusters of *Arbutus unedo* f. *rubra*. (Photo by Daniel Mount)

OPPOSITE: The developing fruits of the pink-flowered strawberry tree. (Photo by Niall Dunne)

Coming from this northerly gene pool, the pink-flowered form is considerably hardier than others. Add the fact that this form also has a lovely dwarf habit—the largest of the Arboretum's 54-year-old trees are just about 20 feet tall—and it's surprising that the plant is not commercially available this side of the Atlantic. (The Pat Calvert Greenhouse is propagating cuttings of the pink-flowered strawberry tree and should have a limited supply of them ready for sale by late spring 2015.)

The strawberry tree has been brought into gardens since classical times, not only for its beauty but also for medicinal purposes. The edible but astringent fruits were used to treat urinary and digestive problems. Despite their insipid texture and taste, they were also used for making marmalade. (Pliny was so famously unimpressed with the taste of the fruit, he named the plant "unedo," meaning "I eat one" in Latin. Linnaeus preserved this moniker when he gave the plant its scientific name in 1753.) It

## The Butterfly and the Strawberry Tree

The strawberry tree is host to the one of the most spectacular butterflies in the European fauna, the Two-tailed Pasha (*Charaxes jasius*). It is the primary food source of the larvae of this butterfly. Adults, though they feed on many flowers and even rotten fruit, can often be found fluttering about strawberry trees during their spring and fall breeding seasons. Very territorial adults will defend a chosen tree, even from humans.



wasn't introduced into England until the 16th century, and those first plants were brought over from Ireland. The Elizabethans called it "Irish arbutus." The first mention of strawberry trees on this side of the Atlantic is found in the 1778 garden lists of Thomas Jefferson at Monticello.

The Arboretum received and planted its first grouping of strawberry trees back in 1937. The pink-flowered form arrived in 1960 as rooted cuttings from George Jackman and Sons Nursery, in Great Britain. (The Jackman

Nursery is actually more famous for its clematis hybrids—in particular the classic *C. × jackmannii*—than for trees and shrubs.) These Irish arbutus were planted—a bit errantly it seems—in the Mediterranean Collection that same year. ~

**DANIEL MOUNT** is an estate gardener, garden writer and member of editorial board of the "Bulletin." He lives on a small farm in the Snoqualmie Valley. Read more of his reflections on plants and gardening at [www.mountgardens.com](http://www.mountgardens.com).



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## Foundation Units and the Arboretum Legacy

BY MEGAN MEYER

*I*n the year that I have been working at the Foundation, I have interacted with many people—including members—who do not know what our units are. That would not have been the case 20 years ago, and that should not be the case today. This article is a first step towards educating members about the history of our units, and starting to think about how we as an organization can support the health and vitality of a program that has been invaluable to our mission.

Indeed, the history of the units represents a significant portion of the history of the Arboretum Foundation itself. Juanita Graham was the wife of Donald Graham, one of the original founders of the Foundation, and she created Unit 1 in the late 1930s. She modeled the units on the guilds of the Children's Orthopedic Hospital in order to create a role for women to become actively involved with the Arboretum. The units' primary function was to develop public interest and support. For many decades, the units also

provided the main organizational structure and supervision for the volunteers at Washington Park Arboretum.

Did you know that units have made many important contributions to the Arboretum over the years? Here are just a few notable ones:

- The Unit Council (a coordinating body comprised of officers from each of the units) planned and produced the first Arboretum Foundation plant sale in 1947. What initially began as a sale under a tent in Rhododendron Glen now lives on as our FlorAbundance spring plant sale at Magnuson Park.

- In 1958, the Unit Council sought permission from the Foundation and the University in order to build a greenhouse in response to a demand for more classes in plant propagation. The Pat Calvert Greenhouse was completed in 1959 and has been volunteer-run ever since.

- In 1961, when the demand for tours of the Arboretum exceeded the director's capacity, the Unit Council responded by launching

**ABOVE:** Unit 69 touring the garden of Unit 5 member Susan Ayrault in the summer of 2014.

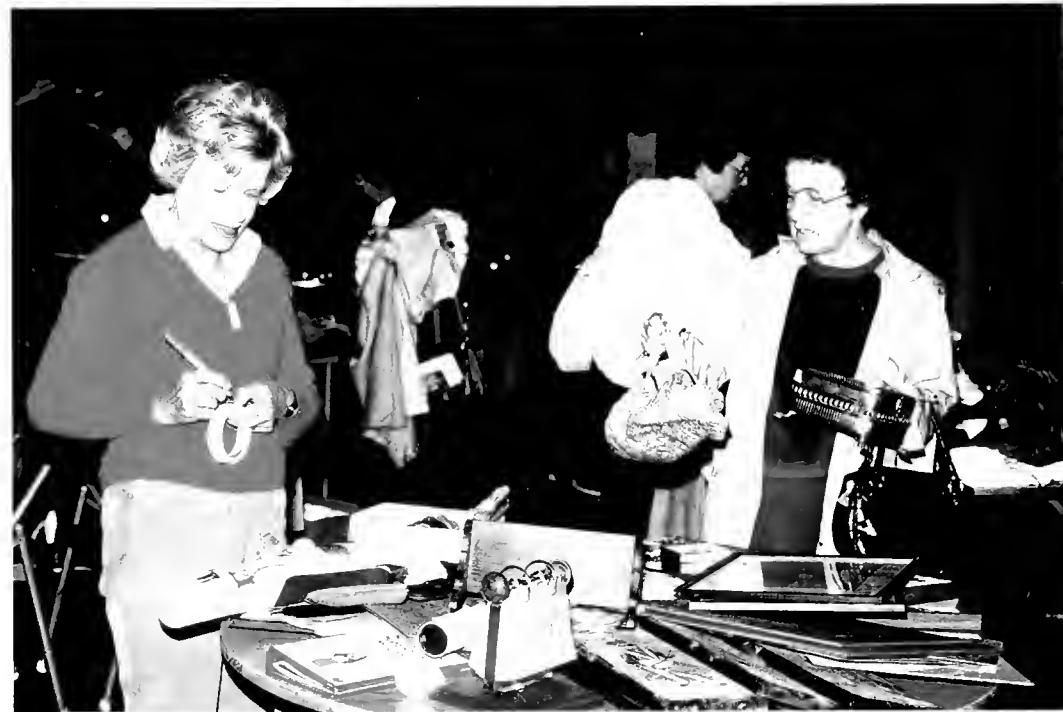
the Arboretum Guide Program. One year later, when the Seattle Japanese Garden was opened, the Guide Program expanded to include Japanese Garden guides. Today, the University of Washington Botanic Gardens handles the public tour program for most of the Arboretum, but Unit 86 continues to provide the volunteer force for the Japanese Garden guides.

### Current Unit Activities

Now that the Foundation has paid staff, the responsibility of determining volunteer tasks and needs has been taken off the units' plate. However, unit members continue to respond to our call for volunteers in all arenas: Unit members are Garden Stewards, volunteer at plant sales, help build the display garden, are regular gift shop volunteers, and more. Some units schedule a day to come in and do a service project as a whole, but—more often than not—individual members sign up for opportunities of interest to them and take these on in addition to their unit involvement.

We currently have 21 units, and each one is unique. The best way I have found to describe the units is to call them "garden clubs with a mission." Units have strong social and educational components to them, to be sure, but they also exist in order to support the Washington Park Arboretum.

Each unit has a fundraising component: Every unit member is required to become a member of the Foundation, and many units go above and beyond that by either holding fundraising events on our behalf or adding a donation to their unit dues. For example, in summer 2014, Unit 98 (based in Tacoma and Gig Harbor) raised \$2300 for the Arboretum, through the purchase and resale of



**TOP:** Arboretum Foundation Work and Fun Day, May 1967. Members of all the volunteer units used to come to work in the Arboretum once a year wearing funny hats. (Photo by Joy Spurr)

**BOTTOM:** Unit 71, the Mercer Island Unit, hosts a rummage sale to raise funds for the Arboretum in 1985. (Photo by Helen Moody)

hundreds of gardening books. Last year, the same unit raised more than \$1800 for the Arboretum, through a community-wide garage sale.

Units bring together individuals who share a common bond in their love of nature and horticulture. A common trait of all unit members is a thirst for knowledge. Whether they elect a singular program chair or collectively decide their programs for the year, the programmatic elements are a key component of the unit experience. Most units do a combination of garden tours and guest lecturer events, and they use their unit dues to cover the expenses for these activities.

The frequency and format of unit meetings varies greatly. Some units meet monthly and some meet quarterly. Some units rotate between members' homes and have luncheon meetings, others use community spaces, and others still forego formal meetings and convene wherever their programs are to be held. We offer and encourage each unit to hold at least one meeting a year at the Arboretum, where we treat them to a tour or lecture and coordinate the use of Wisteria Hall in the Graham Visitors Center.

### Unique Histories

Each unit has its own history that can be traced back to an influential Arboretum supporter or group of supporters. For example, Unit 16's first meeting took place on a beautiful spring day in 1965 at Myrtle DeFriel's cottage on Lake Washington. Myrtle was the Eastside Unit Council representative at the time and invited about 20 friends to meet in her garden and form a new unit. The unit's dedication to the Arboretum was genuine. Members actively worked at plant and bulb sales and were rewarded with the Thorgrimson Cup (named for O.B. Thorgrimson, and influential figure in the early days of the Arboretum). Unit 16 is credited with sponsoring the early Arboretum Art Auction, and many of its members have had an active role in the leadership of the Arboretum sales, Pat Calvert Greenhouse, Governing Board, and other Foundation areas. Their Holiday Auction is a successful fundraising event that has allowed them to contribute gifts to the Foundation to fund the purchase of office computers, the *Lagerstroemia* Collection, Pat Calvert Greenhouse remodeling, the Gateway to Chile capital campaign, and more.

Unit 26 from Bainbridge Island started one afternoon in the early 1950s. Lillian McEwan

invited a group of her island neighbors and friends to tea. She shared with them her hope that an Arboretum unit might be formed on Bainbridge Island. Her initial focus was twofold: that the wild blue huckleberry—indigenous to the island—might be saved, and that those in the group might grow in their knowledge of horticulture. Now in its sixth decade, Unit 26 includes members from nearby off-island communities as well as Bainbridge. Several of those who attended the unit's inaugural meeting still belong, as do some second-generation members.

Units have male members, too! Jack Robins recently sent us a brief history of Unit 52, the "Couples Unit." It is a lovely account that provides keen insight into how a unit works, and the value it provides to both the Arboretum and the unit members. Unit 52 was formed in 1970 by Jack and Charlotte Robins and Eilif and Tina Kuhnle, who served as first president and first program chairs, respectively. Unit 52 members John Behnke, Dave Hervey and Fred Isaac all served with distinction as president of the Arboretum Foundation Board of Directors—while Jack Robins, Meg Harry and Tina Kuhnle have all served on our Board.

Over the years, Unit 52 has been deeply involved with volunteering at the Foundation's spring plant sale—working in every area from food preparation in the canteen to table set-up to marking and cashiering. Coupled with the hard work has been a strong social and educational element:

"A tradition of Unit 52," writes Jack, "is to gather on the Saturday evening of the plant sale at George and Peggy Corley's to drink a little wine, enjoy a delicious member-produced dinner, top it off with a slice of special member-made fruit pie, and then move to the living room for

## Raise the Paddle for Our Fabulous Volunteers!

The "Fund-A-Need" live auction during our Opening Night Party at the Northwest Flower & Garden Show on Tuesday, February 10 will raise money to support our multi-faceted volunteer program. Show your support for our amazing volunteers and help us keep this vital program thriving!

For details, email Megan Meyer at [mmeyer@arboretumfoundation.org](mailto:mmeyer@arboretumfoundation.org) or call her at (206) 325-4510.

a short Unit meeting, mostly to elect officers of the coming year and to solicit any new program suggestions for the new Program Chair's consideration. When new officers were announced, George Corley could be counted on to produce his 'Railroad Music'—appropriate to his take on being 'railroaded' in the election process."

As an example of the horticultural- and nature-based activities that the unit participates in each year, Jack sent us the annual meeting program from 1976-77:

*September 26, 1976: Hike to Lake 22—Bring lunch, warm, waterproof clothing & boots*

*November 30, 1976: Meeting at Woodruffs—Mushrooms: principal local edible and inedible varieties*

*January 31, 1977: Meeting at Woosleys—Pruning: how to prune right and why it matters*

*March 29, 1977: Meeting at Gildows—House plants: exotic but easy to raise*

*May 4-5, 1977: Plant Sale at Arboretum—Dinner and meeting at Corleys*

"Memories of our Lake 22 hike live on," writes Jack. "Most of us recall Marian Woosley's complaining (only partly in jest) about how steep the trail was (not very), how rough the trail was (not particularly), how long the trail was (only 2.2 miles), and what a tough trail it was (she was happy to recover from her exertions by drinking

her share of the wine brought in Jack Robins' backpack to celebrate the Robins' 25th wedding anniversary.)"

### Looking Ahead

As Jack illustrates, the key motivators for unit members' involvement are friendship, pursuit of horticultural knowledge, and support of the Arboretum. ("The Park is better off for our efforts," says Jack, "as are we too!") That has remained true from Unit 1's inception in the late 1930s to today. The result of that involvement has been crucial support to the Arboretum Foundation through the units' fundraising efforts, volunteer support and advocacy.

It is true that the number of our units has declined over the years, but that is not surprising given that the traditional unit model was best suited for housewives and retirees with flexible schedules. When we talk about recruitment at our All-Units meetings, the general consensus is that people today lead busier, more complicated lives, and there is more competition for their involvement. Simply put, since people are more reluctant to "join" things that require an ongoing commitment of their time, we may never rebuild our units to the size and strength they once were.

However, there is opportunity for growth. As mentioned, many of our new members and current volunteers do not know what units are, so one of our jobs at the Foundation is to educate and promote units. Accordingly, we will be updating the new member information packet to include information about joining or starting a unit. Our resources for forming new units can emphasize options that are more compatible with today's work schedules. Also, we can build a better system to connect prospective unit members with existing units that have openings; many of our current units are eager to welcome new members! If you would like to join or start a unit, please contact Megan Meyer at (206) 577-0549 or [mmeyer@arboretumfoundation.org](mailto:mmeyer@arboretumfoundation.org).



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**MEGAN MEYER** is the volunteer resources manager at the Arboretum Foundation.

# Stories from the Forest Grove: Childhood, Wildness and Learning

BY JOANNA WRIGHT

**O**n my first day at the Fiddleheads Forest School, one of the preschoolers leads me to his “magic spot” to meet the owls. “Up there, see that bulge?” We peer into the hemlock canopy. “That’s a mother owl and her baby. They’re sleeping right now.” Summoned by his act of imaginative recreation, the inquisitive face of a barred owl appears in my mind’s eye. “I have some bones from the owl pellets, they’re in here.” He kneels down purposefully and lifts a single scale of a pine cone, revealing a small pile of rodent bones stashed underneath. To anyone else, that thumbnail-sized scale is just another bit of forest floor. To him, it’s the lid to his treasure chest, and a link to

the owl friends perched above him, keeping him company in his magic spot.

Fiddleheads Forest School, an outdoor preschool in the Washington Park Arboretum, is among a small but rapidly growing number of early childhood learning centers offering what Richard Louv has called “Vitamin N” — opportunities for developing connection with nature.

There is no shortcut to nature connection, no cheap, quick way to acquire it and be done. Real relationship with the natural world arises from direct, open-ended experience. Fiddleheads and other forest preschools come out of an understanding of early childhood as a unique time for this kind of experience. Full of energy, creativity,

**Fiddleheads kids**  
working on a  
chromatography  
experiment in their  
forest grove class-  
room with teacher  
Kit Harrington.  
(Photo by Sarah  
Heller)





Fiddleheads kids  
engaging in a  
student-driven  
dramatic play,  
fishing for  
“salmon” from a  
nurse log. (Photo  
by Kit Harrington)

and curiosity, young children are tuning into the world through their senses; the familiar yet ever-changing environment of our forest grove classroom offers a rich landscape of discovery.

### Freedom of Exploration

In his recent talk in Seattle, Jon Young, founder of Wilderness Awareness School, emphasized that children have an innate capacity for nature connection, and to grow that capacity they need unstructured, unsupervised time outdoors. They also need reciprocity—mentors who will listen with genuine interest to their stories and observations, and ask them questions that lead to new experiences, new questions.

While “unsupervised” is not realistic in many settings, including ours at Fiddleheads, we use clear safety boundaries to enable freedom of exploration. Curriculum is used to support child-led learning.

There is plenty of open time in our day, during which the children choose what they want to do. Play is the children’s serious work. In an organic way, they engage in activities according to their interests and energy levels, as well as the dynamics of the group. As teachers, we support the children’s engagement by actively keeping our perception open to what is really going on for them, and promoting skills that can help them when they encounter the edges of their comfort zone, knowledge and awareness.

Curricular elements are called forth by the ecological and social dynamics in class. Science and art projects help us delve into and express our observations of the natural world. A “peace table” creates a space for reflection and conflict-resolution. Teachers bring in simple materials such as containers, balls, and garden tools—complementing what the forest provides—with which to exercise fine- and gross-motor skills. There is a strong social/emotional element throughout, in that the children are encouraged to use tools for self-awareness, self-regulation, communication, cooperation and celebration of individuality.

One of the few things structured into every day is time in our “magic spots.” Each child has her or his own magic spot, which she or he returns to over the course of the year. The only “rule” during magic spot time is that no one can disturb others who are in their magic spots. Sometimes, the children in their magic spots will turn their attention outward, using their senses to explore what is around them. Often though, the children use the time to turn inward, sometimes talking to themselves, enjoying uninterrupted time in their own company. While each child’s magic spot is within eyesight of a teacher, we give them enough distance to have the sensation of safe solitude. This is a rare opportunity in childhood today, and witnessing it makes me realize how vital it is. They are invited to stay in their magic spots as long as they wish, and when they return, we have circle

time and snack, sharing stories from our magic spot with the group.

### Winter Weather

The kids at Fiddleheads have taught me many things, including how to have fun outdoors, no matter what the weather. During the week of downpours in early November, we all checked our “puddle armor” (rain gear) and went splashing and running through the Arboretum. We caught raindrops with different kinds of buckets—plastic ones, tin ones—becoming percussionists in the storm. We measured puddle-depth with sticks and turned giant magnolia leaves into boats. One day after school, I was biking home along Lake Washington in a deluge so thick I could hardly see, and found myself laughing out loud, flooded with joy, welcoming the rain. I would be warm and dry soon enough; for now, I was fully feeling the world’s wild weather. The capacity for such raw delight has always been there in me (and is part of what brought me to teaching), but for its accessibility in that moment, I have preschoolers at Fiddleheads to thank.

The rain was followed by a cold snap — clear, blue skies, frosty mornings, and air that nipped at our noses and toes. Suddenly, many more leaves came down in our classroom, carpeting the ground in browns and golds. We went on long hikes to keep warm, buried each other in leaf piles, and examined exquisite ice crystals that popped out of wet ground, shaped like clumps of spaghetti. The mushrooms that we had been watching all autumn began to give themselves back into the ground, visible reminders of the cycle of life.

### Life Cycles

One day, we found a dead house finch in the forest grove. It caught the interest of several kids, who spent much of the morning observing it closely and talking about what might have happened to it. They decided to place it in a little hole in the ground under the magnolia tree, choosing not to cover it, so that they could watch the decomposition process.

After a tender delivery of the bird to its resting place, three of the boys transitioned

seamlessly into an imaginative game in which one of them was a dying bird, being cared for by the others. I watched from a distance as they wrestled with this encounter with mortality. When I described the scene later to one of the boy’s parents, she said the family’s cat was quite sick and elderly, and they had been talking about how it might not be alive for much longer. We wondered together about the connections the boy was making between the experience with the bird and his beloved cat.

Meanwhile, winter deaths and dormancies are accompanied by signs of life; indeed, they are experientially inseparable. Falling leaves are revealing winter buds, reminding us on the coldest of days that spring will come, and that the trees know it. How deeply calming it is to be surrounded by those non-judgmental, patient, rooted beings that give the forest its shape and texture. Many of them germinated there before we were born and will be there after we have gone. It seems to me that their simple, powerful presence is inherently grounding for the children and adults alike.

I feel fortunate to be a part of the Fiddleheads community. I am excited to see how it develops, and curious about the blossoming movement towards experiential, nature-based learning of which it is a part. What are these forces drawing us back to the forests, the wetlands, the wildness of inner and outer landscapes? Who will we become if we listen, if we respond? Time will show us. The children will show us.

*This article was reprinted with permission from the UW Botanic Gardens news blog, at [www.uwbotanicgardens.org](http://www.uwbotanicgardens.org).*

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**JOANNA WRIGHT** is a long-term substitute teacher for the UW Botanic Gardens’ Fiddleheads Forest School. Launched in fall 2013 at Washington Park Arboretum, the Forest School is an entirely outdoor, nature-based preschool for 3- to 5-years-olds. For information on tuition and enrollment, visit [www.uwbotanicgardens.org](http://www.uwbotanicgardens.org), call (206) 616-5261 or email the school’s coordinators Sarah Heller and Kit Harrington at [ffschool@uw.edu](mailto:ffschool@uw.edu).

# *Daphniphyllum macropodium*:

## A STEALTHY STUNNER

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY JANINE ANDERSON



*H*ave you ever strolled along a path in the Arboretum, reveling in the birdsong and the lushness of the flora, and then been dumbstruck by a plant you'd never noticed before? I've had that experience on numerous occasions—and, in truth, on numerous occasions it's happened with a plant I've been struck dumb by before, then forgotten about.

Let me introduce you to *Daphniphyllum macropodium*, a showstopper if ever there were one. You may have seen—and been dazzled by—it before, without realizing it: Five of these large, evergreen beauties flank a trail at the base of the New Zealand Forest in the Pacific Connections Garden. Indeed, the creation of the new forest garden has rescued these specimens from relative obscurity, making them more accessible for visitors to enjoy.

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**ABOVE:** The late-season fruits of *Daphniphyllum macropodium* combine to beautiful effect with the plant's distinctive, evergreen foliage.



## Key Features

*Daphniphyllum macropodium* is a shrub or small tree native to China, Japan and Korea. With a genus name like that, you might expect it to be in the same family as *Daphne* (Thymelaeaceae), but the plant is actually one of more than 20 species of *Daphniphyllum* in the family Daphniphyllaceae. All 20 are evergreen and native to the same regions in Asia. The leaves of *Daphniphyllum* do resemble those of daphne, hence the genus name, which roughly translates into “daphne leaves.” Common names for *Daphniphyllum macropodium*

include false daphne and, in the South, redneck rhododendron—though I don’t think either name, particularly the latter, does justice to this fine plant.

The plant’s narrow leaves can reach 10 inches long and three inches wide and are arranged at the branch tips in tight, whorl-like spirals. The dark-green leaves have beautiful reddish-pink petioles (leaf stalks) and midribs. In early summer, clusters of small, green or creamy-white flowers emerge from the leaf axils and develop into purplish fruits. The blueberry-like fruits ripen by fall and persist on the plant into winter. Although the flowers and fruit have been described as being inconspicuous, I think the fruits, when paired with the leaves, are stunning.

## Complicating Factors

*Daphniphyllum macropodium* is dioecious, which accounts for some of its charm and mystery, but can also be a source of frustration for gardeners. Male and female flowers are borne on different plants, so there will be no fruit (or seeds) unless both sexes are present, and then only the female plant will bear fruit. To increase the likelihood of fruit set, it is recommended that five or more individuals be planted in close proximity, as we find in the Arboretum. Given that one shrub can reach 20 by 20 feet, five plants could cover half a city lot, and not many gardeners have that kind of real estate. The plants in the Arboretum, which date back to the late 1970s and early 1980s, are taller than they are wide (possibly because they have had limited room to spread out), so perhaps only a quarter of a city lot would be needed to contain these five plants.

## What More Is There to Know?

In China, the timber of *Daphniphyllum macropodium* is used in furniture making, but both there and here the plant is grown primarily for the ornamental value of its foliage—and possibly for the thrill of it being so little known, at least here in the Pacific Northwest. (It is somewhat more common in the southern United States.)

Emerging leaves in spring point up and tend to have grayish tones, while older leaves point down

## Another Common Name: Yuzuri-ha

In its native Japan, *Daphniphyllum macropodium* is called *Yuzuri-ha*, a short name heavy with symbolism. It translates to “deferring leaf.” According to Dr. David Creech of the SFA Mast Arboretum, in Nacogdoches, Texas, the phrase refers to the old leaf being replaced by a new leaf in the succeeding season, with no interruption of foliage. He says it also refers to the new leaves giving thanks to the old leaves for their kind nourishment during the winter. In Japan, *Yuzuri-ha* is used as an “ornament for the new year to celebrate the good relationship of old and new generations.”

and are dark green. Unlike with evergreen rhododendrons, the foliage doesn’t curl in cold weather. The plant is hardy in USDA Zones 7 and 8 (which includes the maritime Northwest), though it might be hardy down to Zone 6, with protection, and up to Zone 9. Young branches are red, and then turn brown with age. The trunks are grayish brown and are always single. The plant’s growth rate is slow when young, and then speeds up to a moderate pace as it ages and becomes larger.

Perhaps the most surprising thing about *Daphniphyllum macropodium* is that it is an easy plant to grow in the right circumstances. Similar to many rhododendrons, *D. macropodium* is a woodland shrub and, as such, prefers moist, humus-rich, well-drained soil. Though some sources state the plant does well in full sun, I would err on the side of more shade and less sun. The specimens in the Arboretum looked fabulous in deep shade and still look great after having been partially daylighted with the development of the

New Zealand Forest. I’ve seen yellowed foliage on nursery stock sitting in exposed sites, and given the plant’s foliage is its most-prized feature, maintaining its lusciousness is paramount. To top it all off, *Daphniphyllum macropodium* is reputed to be deer-resistant.

### Where Can I Find It?

When you visit a nursery, I recommend asking for *Daphniphyllum macropodium* by its scientific name rather than the common names. You might encounter some blank stares, but it’s unlikely you’ll go home with the wrong plant. I have seen *Daphniphyllum macropodium* offered for sale in at least one area nursery (including Wells Medina Nursery), and in the catalogs of several specialty nurseries in Western Washington and Oregon (such as Keeping It Green Nursery, Far Reaches Farm and Cistus Nursery).

I would caution against buying *Daphniphyllum macropodium* sight unseen (for example, by mail-order through a catalog), at least not without a promise that the specimen being sold exhibits the show-stopping, deep-pink petioles. Apparently, this feature—the plant’s main gush factor—is not universal. Also, you should plan to appreciate *Daphniphyllum macropodium* for the beauty of its form and foliage alone, as there will be no fruit unless you are willing and able to create a small grove. ~

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JANINE ANDERSON, CPH, is an award-winning Pacific Northwest-based landscape designer ([www.anderson-design.net](http://www.anderson-design.net)), garden writer, speaker, and member of the “Bulletin” Editorial Board.



# Q&A from the Miller Library's Plant Answer Line

## Eating Jerusalem Artichoke

BY REBECCA ALEXANDER

This regular column features Q&A selected and adapted from the Elisabeth C. Miller Library's Plant Answer Line program. If you'd like to ask a plant or gardening question of your own, please call (206) 897-5268 (UW Plant), send it via the library website ([www.millerlibrary.org](http://www.millerlibrary.org)), or email directly to [hortlib@uw.edu](mailto:hortlib@uw.edu).

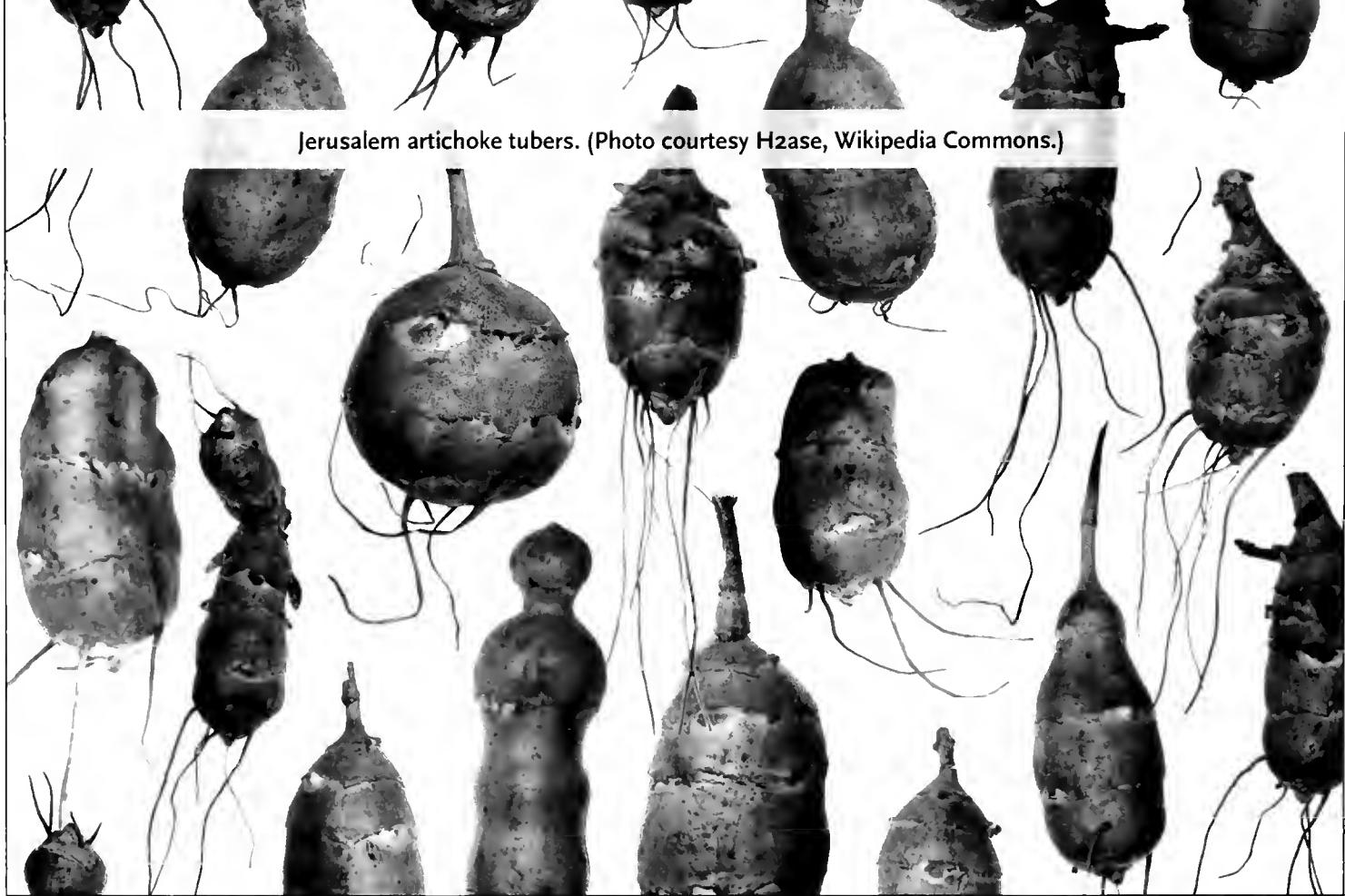


**QUESTION:** Is Jerusalem artichoke native in our region? Did local Native American tribes have uses for it? I grow it, and friends have suggested that it is a good alternative to potatoes for people with diabetes because it has a lower glycemic index. Have you heard anything about that?

**ANSWER:** According to its profile on the website of the U.S. Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service (plants.usda.gov), Jerusalem artichoke or sunchoke (*Helianthus tuberosus*) is commonly found across most of North America. The "Flora of North America" website ([www.efloras.org](http://www.efloras.org)) says that the plant is so widely spread as a weedy species

that its original distribution is difficult to discern. However, based on evidence from regional herbaria, it's unlikely that the plant was originally native to the coastal Northwest.

"I do not consider *Helianthus tuberosus* native to Washington, mainly because I have never seen it in a wild setting," says Dr. David Giblin, Collections Manager for the University of Washington Herbarium at the Burke Museum. "Our sole Washington specimen, collected in the southeast corner of the State in 1950 by Arthur Cronquist, has 'roadside weed' as part of the collection information, so I'd be disinclined to consider that a native, natural population."



Jerusalem artichoke tubers. (Photo courtesy H2ase, Wikipedia Commons.)

“Considering the size of the plant and its rhizomatous nature,” adds David, “if it were native here I would expect at least several, if not many, collections of this species. Even tiny, rare things often have multiple collections from several individuals from different years and locations. Without such a pattern for *H. tuberosus*, it is hard to consider it native—though, of course, it could have been here historically prior to collecting in the region, which really began in the late 1800s. Louis Henderson did a comprehensive botanical survey of Washington in the early 1890s, and he did not collect this species. It is hard to imagine that he would have missed this.”

As further evidence of Jerusalem artichoke’s non-native status in our region, I found no mention of the plant in the local Native American ethnobotany literature. The book “Native American Food Plants: An Ethnobotanical Dictionary” by Daniel Moerman (Timber Press, 2010) mentions uses of the plant’s tubers by numerous tribes, but not ones in the Pacific Northwest.

The Ladybird Johnson Wildflower Center’s Native Plant Database says that *Helianthus tuberosus* “was cultivated by Native Americans of the Great Plains and has spread eastward. The edible tuber is highly nutritious and, unlike potatoes, contains no starch, but rather

## Why “Jerusalem”?

The common name for *Helianthus tuberosus* mistakenly suggests it might be from Jerusalem, but the name probably evolved through faulty pronunciation—either of the Italian word for sunflower (*girasol*) or, more likely, of Terneuzen, a city in the southwestern Netherlands, where a 17th-century Dutch gardener began distributing the plant throughout Europe. Another theory is that pilgrims in North America believed the plant would be a wonderful new food source in their “New Jerusalem.” (Source: D. R. Cosgrove et al. “Jerusalem Artichoke” in “Alternative Feed Crops Manual,” University of Wisconsin and University of Minnesota Extension [accessed online November 1, 2014].) The second part of the plant’s common name is easier to explain because the flavor of *H. tuberosus* tubers resembles that of a globe artichoke.

carbohydrate in a form that is metabolized into natural sugar. In 1805 Lewis and Clark dined on the tubers, prepared by a native woman, in what is now North Dakota."

Some tribes, such as the Chippewa (whose historical territory centered around the Great Lakes), traditionally used the tubers raw, while others like the Dakota boiled them and noted that their overuse caused flatulence (more about that later!). Several tribes (Huron, Lakota) only used the tubers during periods of famine to fend off starvation.

I recommend consulting a healthcare professional to find out if Jerusalem artichokes would be a better choice than potatoes (which contain starch) for someone with diabetes. *Helianthus tuberosus*, like other sunflowers, is in the family Asteraceae. It contains a polysaccharide (a type of carbohydrate) called inulin. The American Diabetes Association says that it's not necessarily true that potatoes or other starches are problematic—it is more about portion size and developing a balanced diet.

Another thing to consider is that not everyone has an easy time digesting the inulin in Jerusalem artichokes. Although culinary use of the plant has become quite a trend lately, some chefs will not serve it in their restaurants, according to "Bon Appetit" magazine (article by Andrew Knowlton, February 19, 2013), and the tubers have acquired the unhappy nickname "fartichoke." The "Plants for a Future" online database ([www.pfaf.org](http://www.pfaf.org)) refers somewhat more delicately to inulin intolerance, which may be genetic: "[inulin] tends to ferment in their guts and can cause quite severe wind."

As you probably know, *Helianthus tuberosus* prefers sun and can reach ten feet in height. You can plant small tubers in early to late spring. It is an easy plant to grow, and in some cases it proliferates like a weed. It might be good to confine it to one part of your garden if you can. ☺

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**REBECCA ALEXANDER** is the Plant Answer Line librarian at the Miller Library, located in the UW Botanic Gardens' Center for Urban Horticulture (3501 NE 41st Street, Seattle).



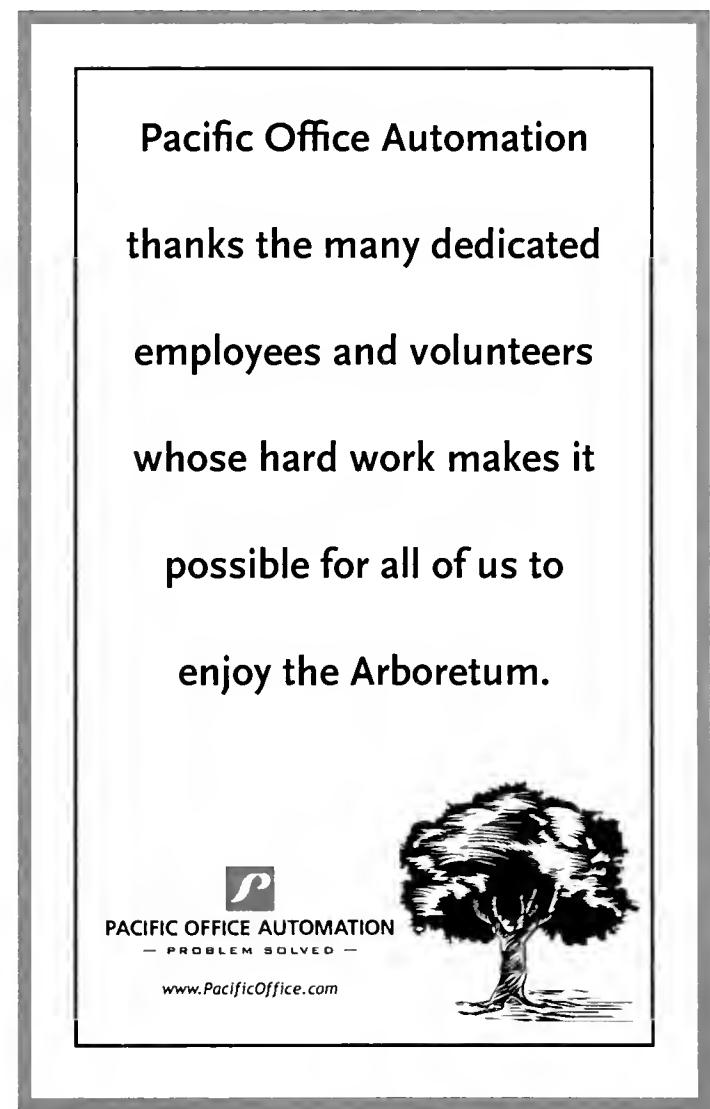
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# Nature and Garden Poetry

BY REBECCA ALEXANDER

## Why Poetry?

There are many unexpected things to discover on the shelves of the Elisabeth C. Miller Library, and poetry is among them. It can be found in the substantial Garden Literature section (which also includes essays, memoirs and humor—all with a horticultural focus), in the Children's section, and in the Pacific Northwest Connections section (three books featured here are by Northwest writers). The books reviewed here are just a sampling of the variegated and diverse intersections of poetry with plants and gardening.

So, why poetry? Plants captivate us in so many ways; this is why we fill our gardens with them, study their habits, puzzle out and classify them. While horticulture and botany are ways to know plants, poems that focus on the natural world reach for another kind of understanding—one that does not adhere to systems or rules. Here, the imagination can have its way, creating resonances that transcend empirical knowledge.

## Local Poets

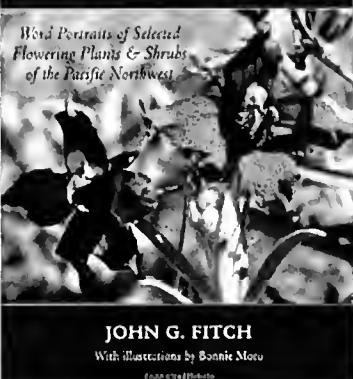
The title of Robert Michael Pyle's most recent book might fool readers into supposing it a scholarly treatise aimed at the ultra-specialist in the family Iridaceae. Look inside the cover of "Evolution of the Genus Iris," and all will become clear:



These are poems of everyday life from the particular perspective of a Pacific Northwest naturalist (Pyle lives in Grays River, Washington). The Miller Library has several other books by Pyle, including "Wintergreen," about the ecology of the

Willapa Hills, and "The Butterflies of Cascadia: A Field Guide to All the Species of Washington, Oregon, and Surrounding Territories." The plain-spoken poems in Pyle's new book (his first collection of poetry) feature garden perennials, reflections on the Palouse Giant Earthworm, longhorn beetles, butterflies, banana slugs, and—how could I resist mentioning—a paean to librarians. One of my favorites is "Botany Lesson: Cleome." It begins, "He called it bee balm, but I heard bee bomb." The poet and his friend are on a butterfly-collecting trip, encountering specimens of wild *Cleome*. Pyle points out that Theophrastus's coinage of *Cleome* was based on a mistaken notion that the plant was related to mustard, when it is actually "a caper called spider plant, or bee / plant, for the love of honeybees—but never bee balm." It's a poem of friendship and reminiscence, as well as an observation about the complexities and accidental poetry of naming things.

## WILDFLOWERS of the COAST



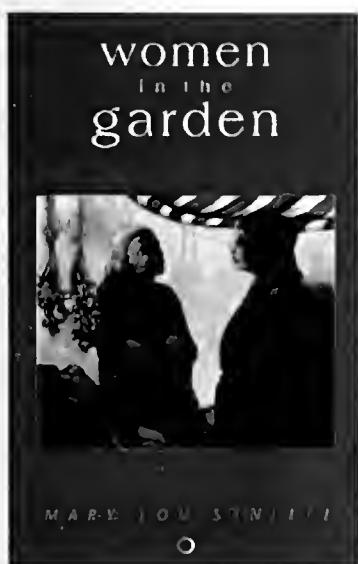
JOHN G. FITCH  
With illustrations by Bonnie More

Photo credit: Bobbi

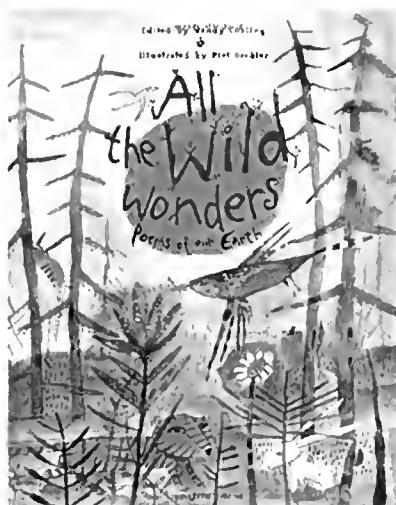
"Wildflowers of the Coast: Word Portraits of Selected Flowering Plants & Shrubs of the Pacific Northwest," by John G. Fitch (Professor Emeritus at the University of Victoria, B.C. in the Department of Greek and Roman Studies) presents a "poetry of knowledge"—a term he prefers to "didactic poetry." Here, the poetic form engages with a systematic body of knowledge, in this case, botany. Fitch aims to marry art and science in his work. To my ear, the poems sound quite "prose-y," but this is not a conventional field guide, either. The poetic form opens up lyrical possibilities beyond

scientific description. Word choice, simile and metaphor are important here. Fitch's classical and botanical knowledge merge seamlessly as Greek and Latin roots of plants are unearthed to enrich understanding and deepen the imagery of the poems. The genus name of *Lysichiton americanus* (skunk cabbage, swamp lantern) means "loosens its tunic," which is what the plant does when the flowers emerge from the spathe: "It flares like ignis fatuus, / that other lantern of the marsh." [Note: *ignis fatuus*, literally "foolish fire," or will-o'-the-wisp.] These poems in many instances describe a plant's habitat, its times and stages of emergence, its native uses, the proper pronunciation of its name and more. Bonnie Moro's botanical art illustrates this collection, which is a hybrid of descriptive botany and botanical poetry.

The authors of the two collections described above are known primarily for their work in other fields. Port Townsend writer Mary Lou Sanelli, on the other hand, is well known locally for her poetry. "Women in the Garden" was published in 2001. These poems connect life and death with the domestic affairs of nurturing and being nurtured by the garden. In several poems, death catches gardeners in the act of gardening ("Missing Laura" and "Lightning"), throwing chard on the compost pile or toiling among the hollyhocks. Not surprisingly, the garden is fertile ground for metaphors of change, loss and rebirth. The garden is a source of comfort, too, as the poet plants bulbs in "Private Life": "The idea of crocus / displaying the world at my feet / eases the onset of winter / months I find difficult to embrace / easier to encircle with irises, daffodils."

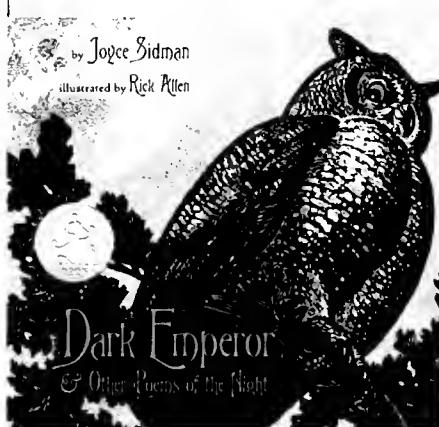


**Poems for the Young and Older**  
Poetry has a happy home in the Children's Collection of the Miller Library. The



anthology "All the Wild Wonders: Poems of Our Earth" (edited by Wendy Cooling, illustrated by Piet Grobler) includes a wide range of writers throughout time—from William Blake and John Milton to contemporary writers around the world. British-Guyanese writer Grace Nichols's ode, "For Forest," speaks of a forest that keeps secrets: "Forest tune in everyday / To watersound and birdsound / Forest letting her hair down / to the teeming creeping of her forest-ground." Rasta performance poet Benjamin Zephaniah's "Natural Anthem" riffs on a familiar anthem: "God save our gracious green / Long live our glorious scene / God save our green. " All the writers celebrate nature in words that are accessible to readers of every age.

Also notable is Joyce Sidman's "Dark Emperor & Other Poems of the Night," illustrated by Rick Allen. Some poems here rhyme, and a few are humorous ("I Am a Baby Porcupette," "Ballad of the Wandering Eft"), but all hold their own as finely crafted literature with sharp observations of the natural world. Each poem's facing page provides details on the



nocturnal aspects of creatures, trees, mushrooms and even planets (a poem about the moon as daylight approaches is in the form of an *ubi sunt*, a kind of medieval lament).

In "Oak After Dark," the tree is hard at work "feeding leaves and sealing pores"—and at the same time playing host to a whole ecosystem: "While beetles whisper in my bark / while warblers roost in branches dark." This book is a delight for all the senses—beautifully written and illustrated.

## Family Arrangements

“Flora Poetica: The Chatto Book of Botanical Verse,” compiled by Sarah Maguire, stands out for its unusual arrangement. The poems here are

grouped alphabetically by plant family. For each plant featured, the editor also includes scientific and common names, and native habitat. Grouping by plant family generates thought-provoking juxtapositions, such as William Blake’s “Ah! Sun-flower” facing

Allen Ginsberg’s “Sunflower Sutra,” or John Clare, side by side with Vikram Seth in contemplation of wheat (*Triticum* species). The poets included here span centuries and continents, and readers are certain to find poems that engage their imaginations. Anthologies such as this one are excellent gateways to discovering authors who are unfamiliar to us.



## New Year

*a marcescent oak,*

*I am wearing the old year's cloak*

*into the new*

*colors muddled under*

*the dust of seasons*

*histories of love and struggle*

*loosen their stitches*

*in the wind's insistent whistling,*

*Abscise, abscise!*

*I'll make way for buds*

*but in my own good time*

— REBECCA ALEXANDER

## A Conversation of Words and Pictures

“Weeds and Wild Flowers” is a beautifully designed book, with Jessica Greenman’s delicate etchings interleaved among Alice Oswald’s poems. Oswald warns readers that this book is not “a reliable guide to wild flowers, though it may be a reliable record of someone’s wild or wayward selves.” Many of the poems ascribe human characteristics to their plant subjects or plant qualities to humans, but this is an oversimplification of their eerie inventiveness. Consider “Narrow-lipped Helleborine”: “In her white nightdress, when she occasionally sleepwalks, /

she resembles a closed umbrella, hunching her spokes.” This could be botanically descriptive of *Epipactis leptochila* (an orchid found in chalky soils in English woodlands), but that is not really the point. Oswald is capturing some elusive essence or mood that she associates with each plant—the story it conjures with its shape or color or habit, and its mirroring of human qualities.

The music of these poems lodges firmly in memory: I can always call to mind “Bristly Ox-tongue” and its repetitive rhythm (appropriate for an invasive weed that “Has enormous jaws, chewing on silence”), or the elegiac “Primrose,” a timeline of bloom, decay and death: “April the thirteenth. Almost dead. / Face like wet paper. Hanging yellow head. / [...] Fifteenth sixteenth. So on so on. / Soul being siphoned off. Colour gone.”

Just as gardening is both art and science, a gardener’s love of plants is founded not only on facts but also an appreciation for the beautiful, the ineffable, and even the peculiar. The world of plants is rich with imagery, and even its scientific vocabulary is colorful. It’s not only bumblebees and ants who are seduced by the delicious notion of a plant’s extrafloral nectaries, or plant physiologists who ponder a tree’s stubborn tendency to hold its withered leaves. These are tenacious

images, full of metaphorical potential. Time to read—or write—a poem! ~

**REBECCA ALEXANDER** is the Plant Answer Line librarian at the Elisabeth C. Miller Library, UW Botanic Gardens.

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